

[CFP: Special Issue of College Literature - Toni Morrison and Adaptation](#)

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Toni Morrison and Adaptation, a Special Issue of *College Literature* - Call for Proposals Edited by Stacie McCormick and Rhaisa Williams

The year 2020 will mark the 50th anniversary of the publication of Toni Morrison's inaugural novel, *The Bluest Eye*, a work that engages in innovative methods of adaptation by transforming the *Dick and Jane* primer into a powerful narrative charting the move from innocence to experience as inflected by blackness. In 2006, the novel was adapted into a stage play written by Lydia Diamond. Indeed, Morrison's work both engages in the act of adaptation (modifying folktales, images, and song into narrative) and continues to be adapted in other formats (notable instances are *Beloved*, *Jazz*, and *The Bluest Eye*). The 50th anniversary of *The Bluest Eye* serves as an apt occasion to reflect on the transformational and intertextual character of Morrison's work.

In her 1988 lecture "Unspeakable Things Unspoken, The Afro-American Presence in American Literature," Morrison explains her effort to "transfigure the complexity and wealth of Afro-American culture into a language worthy of the culture." Charged with the aims to create intimacy in her texts while shaping and breaking silences, Morrison proffers her use of language (speakerly, aural, colloquial) and reliance on codes embedded in black culture to do such work. Scholars of black literature have long theorized about the speakerly text. One cannot gainsay Morrison's innovation in this literary tradition. In fact, more than just a set of narratives about the black past, Morrison's work provides an analytic to theorize blackness and a reconsideration of the boundaries of genre. Often drawing upon orality and embodiment, Morrison's work demands that we attend to its performative and adaptive elements.

For this special issue, we invite essays that analyze Morrison's artistic and intellectual imprint on the stage, screen, and through lyric. By examining and theorizing Morrison's intricate relationship to and critical impact on adaptation and performance genres, we attend to a necessary component of Morrison's creative process, which she spells out in her essay "The Site of Memory." Stating that the genesis of the black literary tradition began with slave narratives, Morrison illustrates how the strategic silences and "bouts of forgetfulness" blacks authors used to make their experiences "palatable to those [white patrons] who were in a position to alleviate" the violence against them demonstrates the complicated relationship black people have had to the written word. One particular

implication of such silences meant that "there was no mention of their [blacks'] interior life." As a methodological corrective to this lack, Morrison offers a trust in recollections, the relationship between images, and creative imagination that privilege acts of performance, which enabled witnessing and passing on without written record. Illustrated in her method of "literary archaeology," this multi-constitutive process, in which genre fluidity is necessary to reconstituting black history and black life, crucially dissipates the divide between the processes for living and adaptation.

Yet although adaptation stands as a feature of Morrison's creative methodology as well as a prominent mode of critical artistic engagement with her work, scholars have not fully attended to the breadth and complexity of adaptation across Morrison's oeuvre. There exists great possibility for assessing how practices of what Soyini Madison calls "embodied writing" animate Morrison's work where "[t]he stories the old folks told us - the stories we tell each other - press against hard surfaces for us to touch and hold" (Madison). Often, these are stories from childhood that differently surface throughout our lifetimes, and gleaning how they surface is, Morrison contends, the "imaginative way" in which "you find out all sorts of things that are there that have just been pushed off as children's stories which is absurd" (1985). Whether called "literary archaeology," "imaginative way," or just storytelling, the bodies, voices, and histories through which stories are passed exhibit the quality of performance that undergirds all of Morrison's work.

Such performance quality is, perhaps, why Tom Smith, former associate director of the Writers Institute, took the risk of co-commissioning Morrison's 1986 play *Dreaming Emmett* despite long histories of failure for novelists becoming playwrights. "In teaching her books to my students," Smith shares, "I had been reading them aloud in class and was struck by how marvelous some of the scenes were as scenes" (1985). In many ways, Smith's comments speak to the literary roots of the field of Performance Studies in which stories were read aloud and enacted to better understand the meaning of the text. But our turn to Morrison—as novelist, essayist, playwright, and lyricist—is an attempt to go beyond the meaning of stories to, instead, reach the connective threads of bodies, childhood stories, histories, and the narrative forms that carry them to understand Morrison's impact on theories of performance, adaptation, and ultimately, imagination. With that said, how, then, do we touch and hold Morrison's work? How does performance and adaptation help us theorize the ways Morrison enlivens narrative through her rich description of gesture? How does Morrison's approach to temporality become enriched once considered through performance? What new insights might we gain about the subject of adaptation when read in the context of Morrison?

We seek essays that theorize Morrison's work in relation, but not limited to:

- Theories of adaptation
- Black artistic and cultural formalism
- Black feminist artistic practices
- Critical engagement with Morrison's stage plays and/or operas (*Margaret Garner; Desdemona; Dreaming Emmett; New Orleans, A Musical*)
- Children's Literature (*The Tortoise or the Hare*, co-authored with Slade Morrison)
- Film and stage adaptations of Morrison's novels (*Jazz, The Bluest Eye, Beloved*)
- Music
 - How hip-hop, classical, jazz artists adapted Morrison's work
 - How Morrison produced work in different formats such as "song cycles" or operettas

- Visual Art
- Recuperation of history and culture
- Forms of intimacy
- Regional theater communities
- Embodiment
- Multiple temporalities
- Commemoration

Please submit a CV and 500 word abstract for essays between 8000-10000 words to Stacie McCormick and Rhaisa Williams at morrisonadaptation@gmail.com by **September 1, 2018**. When submitting, also copy *College Literature* (collit@wcupa.edu). Article drafts will be due **May 30, 2019**, and sent out for anonymous peer review. For conditionally accepted essays, it is our hope to have an article workshop during Spring 2019 held at Washington University in St. Louis. The special issue will be released in Summer 2020 to correspond with the 50th anniversary of the publication of *The Bluest Eye*.

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